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Twice Erased: The Silencing of Feminisms in Her Noise

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This article focuses on the feminist voice of the Her Noise project, aiming to analyze how it was shaped by the context in which the project took place. Her Noise began in 2001 as a multidisciplinary, multi-output project to gather information and research about women working in experimental music and sound. The terms “experimental music,” “sound,” and “boundaries of inclusion” were not clearly articulated at the outset of the project and continued to shift throughout its development. The fifteen years since the inception of Her Noise and the afterlife of the project and its numerous iterations have allowed me to think about the curatorial voice of the project in a new way. This article is an attempt to articulate those thoughts and to respond to a question posed by researcher and artist Holly Ingleton in 2012:¹ Her question of “how the project was feminist ... and what kinds of feminist approaches might have been instrumental to its development” prompted this response.

It is important to qualify that the observations in this paper are entirely my own, and the co-curator of the Her Noise project, Anne Hilde Neset, and other key participants in the project, may have different and even opposing views on the subject.

Her Noise: The Spoken and the Unspoken

The Her Noise project, at least in its initial manifestations—as an exhibition, a series of events, and an in-progress “living” archive at South London Gallery and other venues in 2005—was never explicitly articulated as a feminist project. In fact, the term “feminist” was not at all used, not in the exhibition catalogue, press release, events guide, marketing, or advertising copy. I want to explore first the reasons behind the erasure of the feminist voice of the project; and second, I want to ask where the feminist strategies were to be found if they were not explicitly voiced.

¹ Holly Ingleton, “Her Noise: Identifying Feminist Strategies,” *Reflections on Process in Sound* 1 (Autumn 2012): 47, <http://irisgarrelfs.com/reflections-on-process-in-sound>, accessed 2 August 2015.

I begin by pointing to three unspoken aspects of the Her Noise project which I believe have never been articulated in relation to each other: the silences of Her Noise. I want to propose that through the confluence of these three silent, unarticulated elements of the project, it may become possible to identify the feminist strategy or strategies of Her Noise.

1. Ambiguity of the curatorial statement

The materials generated during the project make clear that Her Noise never had a well-defined curatorial statement, or at least not one that was clearly articulated. In exploring the rationale for inclusion or exclusion, the parameters of the project, and its West-centric, white, and dispersed (in terms of the range and seemingly random inclusion of artists) profile, we can begin to expose the fluid, “non-committal” nature of the Her Noise curating.

2. Disciplinary slippage

Her Noise used a strategy of examining one discipline (music) within the framework of another (visual art). I shall examine the usefulness of this strategy and whether disciplinary slippage might be the key to the feminist strategy of Her Noise.

3. Avoidance of the term “feminism”

As mentioned above, the project did not articulate any relationship to feminism. I shall consider whether this avoidance was deliberate and if so, the reasons behind the decision to evade the term.

Background

The Her Noise project was prompted by a realization that a series titled Interference² which Anne Hilde Neset and I co-curated (alongside significant curatorial input by Rob Young) between 1998 and 2001 at the LUX Centre for Film, Video & Digital

² The Interference series ran bi-monthly for three years at the LUX Centre for Film, Video & Digital Arts in London, and presented seventeen events between March 1998 and March 2001. The series was conceived by the author (then working as Education Co-ordinator at the Lux Centre) as a way of connecting discourses around moving image work and sound-based practices. The series of talks, performances, screenings and panel discussions featured, among others: Brandon Labelle, Terre Thaemlitz, David Toop, Philip Jeck, Robin Rimbaud-Scanner, Kodwo Eshun, Thomas Koner, Jurgen Reble, Add n to X, Vicki Bennett - People Like Us, and Kaffe Matthews.

Arts in London, had featured only two women among dozens of men across seventeen events. In other words, what we set out to understand were the social structures and pathways that led two female curators whose identities were ideologically and culturally shaped by artists such as Kim Gordon, Lydia Lunch, Diamanda Galas and Kathleen Hanna, curate an almost entirely male-populated series.

With this realization in 2001, we set out to insert the “missing women” into art history at the inception of *Her Noise*, through showcasing, enabling, embedding, and mapping their work. This new project was to be shaped organically, later acquiring its title through an anagram of the word “Heroines.” Our ambitious mission was articulated in a simple question posed in the curators’ essay in the catalogue, one that addressed dominant art historical narratives and their inherent sexism: “Why is it that even though we are surrounded by a sea of amazing women making music, the official histories remain predominantly male?”³ Feminist art historian Griselda Pollock asks, “Is adding women to art history the same as producing feminist art history?”⁴ as a way of opening up an analysis of feminist interventions into art historical narratives. She observes: “Women have not been omitted through forgetfulness or mere prejudice. The structural sexism of most academic disciplines contributes actively to the production and perpetuation of a gender hierarchy.”⁵

The *Her Noise* question about the mechanisms of erasure of women on the path to canonization, in fact, concealed something much more complex that we, as curators, were grappling with, perhaps unknowingly, and that was our own struggle to understand and process the problematic “post-feminist” moment in which we were living, and into which we were maturing. The *Her Noise* question about the discrepancy between what we were living and what was considered to be worth historicizing was a way of reflecting on the realization that in our own curatorial work we had unknowingly replicated the mechanisms inherent in patriarchy perfectly.

Going Beyond Feminism

³ Lina Džuverović and Anne Hilde Neset, “Introduction: Revealing *Her Noise*,” *Her Noise* (London: Forma, 2005), 9.

⁴ Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and Histories of Art*, 3rd edn. (London: Routledge, 2003), 1.

⁵ Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, 1.

What is perhaps most difficult to understand is our avoidance of the term “feminism.” It does not appear in the introductory curatorial essay in the Her Noise catalogue written by the two curators, nor in any other written material, or in interviews we conducted for the Her Noise Archive. The essay speaks of our desire to “redress the balance [...] and find a viable alternative to the male dominated world of music”⁶ but never does it position the project as explicitly feminist.

Conceived at the height of the backlash against second wave feminism, we thought of Her Noise as “post-feminist,” believing that by curating an exhibition of sound-based work by women, yet not articulating it as a feminist project, we were going beyond⁷ feminism, taking one step further, thus avoiding the alienation from the visual arts establishment that an outwardly feminist project, at that moment, would have brought about.

In her article “Her Noise: Identifying Feminist Strategies,”⁸ Holly Ingleton has analyzed what she terms the “ambiguous foundations” of the project by focusing on this very expression “going beyond” used in an interview Irene Revell conducted with me in 2006.⁹ In the interview, I assert that “the feminist politics of Her Noise were so at the core of the project, that they could and should remain implicit, so that other issues in the project could gain recognition.”¹⁰ In an attempt to understand precisely *how* Her Noise is a feminist project, Ingleton analyzes the possible meanings of “going beyond.” Ingleton likens “going beyond” with the idea of “identifying yet not identifying” in the light of feminist historian Joan W. Scott’s analysis of the intrinsic paradox of contemporary feminist thought, which includes the need “both to accept *and* to refuse ‘sexual difference’”¹¹ and which attributes feminism’s socio-cultural

⁶ Džuverović and Neset, *Her Noise*.

⁷ The Her Noise Interview: Lina Džuverović interviewed by Irene Revell, produced by Electra, 2006. Available at Her Noise Archive? Please confirm. Will fix space problem above and below.

⁸ Ingleton, “Her Noise.”

⁹ FN 9 does not exist in the main text but the notes did not renumber. Will fix note numbering.

⁹ Ingleton, “Her Noise,” 44.

¹¹ The Her Noise Interview. [Will fix note numbering.]

¹¹ Joan W. Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 3. Quoted by Holly Ingleton, “Her Noise: Identifying Feminist Strategies,” *Reflections on Process in Sound* 1 (Autumn 2012): 47, <http://irisgarrelfs.com/reflections-on-process-in-sound>.

production to the “contesting and converging claims over the meanings and applications of equality and difference.”¹²

This paradox, which I agree is central to the “identifying yet not identifying” in *Her Noise*, lies at the heart of the curatorial voice(s) of *Her Noise*, determining *how* we chose to advance the project. The ambiguity of *Her Noise* was the product of the moment in which it emerged, articulated by Angela McRobbie in the phrase “complexification of the backlash”¹³—the undoing and undermining of feminism while “simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well informed and even well intended response to feminism.”¹⁴ In other words, McRobbie refers to a moment in the late 1990s and early 2000s in which “feminist gains” of 1970s and 1980s were taken for granted, and core ideas of feminism were co-opted to suit other agendas.

It is this “double entanglement”—defined by McRobbie as “the co-existence of neoconservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life with the process of liberalization in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations”—and the “taking into accountness”¹⁵ of feminist gains, that I believe silenced the curatorial feminist voice of *Her Noise*. We, the *Her Noise* curators, had been brought up on a diet of not just feminist music, literature, and art, but also with a profound belief in equality and in finding ways to *live* feminism. Yet in a post-Spice Girls world of the early 2000s, somehow the term did not roll off our tongues easily.

Were the gains of second wave feminism just a hazy backdrop to a commodified, mediated Bridget Jones form of female pseudo-liberation? Was our generation simply perplexed and a little embarrassed by the sweeping generalizations made in the public eye in the name of feminism? Was to outwardly call yourself a feminist in 2005 automatically associated with a pseudo liberalized “cute but loud” (or worse, sexy when angry) Scary Spice type of character? As Nina Power writes about the “cheapening” of feminism: “almost everything turns out to be “feminist”—shopping, pole-dancing, even eating chocolate,”¹⁶ further pointing to the “remarkable

¹² Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer*, 3; quoted in Ingleton, “Her Noise,” 47.

¹³ Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Ltd, 2008), 11.

¹⁴ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 11.

¹⁵ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 11.

¹⁶ Nina Power, *One-Dimensional Woman* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009), 27.

similarity between ‘liberating’ feminism and ‘liberating’ capitalism and the way in which the desire for emancipation starts to look like something wholly interchangeable with the desire to simply buy more things.”¹⁷ Was Riot Grrrl suffering in the shadows of Spice Girls? To quote Kim Gordon from her recent discussion of Pussy Riot and Riot Grrrl: “They [Riot Grrrl bands] didn’t want to do interviews and were afraid of being co-opted by the mainstream press—a legitimate fear. Then, sure enough, Spice Girls come along and package this as “girl power.”¹⁸

How were we to speak of, and incorporate, the politics of Riot Grrrl, but also distance ourselves from this mutant form of “ladette feminism”¹⁹ that was present in the public consciousness, and which was much louder and better marketed, than the already vague memory of the original force that was Riot Grrrl? The backlash had undone feminism—it made feminism ugly and our silence was a way of processing this undoing.

Into the Artworld

We approached over sixty-four venues across the UK and Europe about the project between 2002 and 2004.. The longer we sent the project proposal around, the more we felt we needed to adapt it to suit the moment and interests of the times, as well as the particular agendas of our target venues. The more rejections we received, the less confident we became. For some potential venues, we sent out proposals that did not mention that we were proposing an all-female exhibition, nor that it was a sound-based one. It began to lose shape.

Even the final articulation of the project which stated “five newly commissioned works by international artists whose practice shares the use of sound as a medium to investigate social relations, inspire action or uncover hidden soundscapes,”²⁰ is perhaps a meeker version of the radical political agency that we might have liked to have expressed, but could not find the voice to articulate. I believe

¹⁷ Power, *One-Dimensional Woman* 27

¹⁸ Kim Gordon, “We Need a Pussy Riot,” 27 August 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_pOkmnauUUI..

¹⁹ “Ladette” is “a young woman who behaves in a boisterously assertive or crude manner and engages in heavy drinking.” See Oxford Dictionaries, http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/ladette.

²⁰ Exhibition outline as articulated in the Her Noise press release, e-flux, and events booklet, 2005.

that the timing of the project's realization did not allow us to articulate our feminist agenda openly.

We avoided outspoken and direct engagement with feminist politics out of fear of the outward association with second wave feminism and a dismissal by the artworld. The London artworld did not appear to us at all interested in what we had to offer, unless we dressed it up as something more palatable. At the height of the success of the young British artists [yBas,]²¹ at least in the UK, the dominant, tabloid-friendly tone associated with female empowerment was one seen in the work of Tracey Emin and Sarah Lucas. This was a brash, loud, tongue-in-cheek, explicit, beer drinking, swearing, ladette form of empowerment, which was far from the aesthetics, ethics, and histories that we were interested in exploring with our exhibition. A number of artists in the project were also uncomfortable with being part of an all-women show, or with the association with outward feminist politics, and articulated that quite clearly in their discussions with us.

We wanted to make sure we had a voice but the only way forward that we saw was to silence the explicit feminist politics of the project. In retrospect it is clear we were not alone in this struggle at that time: in an interview about the timing of "WACK!, Art and the Feminist Revolution" which took place at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles two years after *Her Noise*, curator Connie Butler referred to failed attempts in the 1990s to place feminist exhibitions: "There was subsequently a lot of talk in the mid-1990s about a big [feminist] show happening. At one point, Laura Cottingham shopped around a proposal that never came to fruition."²² In the end, only the South London Gallery committed to the *Her Noise* project and to supporting it with funding, staff, and other resources.²³

²¹ The term young British Artists (yBa) refers to a generation of artists, most of whom graduated from London's Goldsmiths College in the late 1980s, in BA Fine Art, and who were by the early 2000s enjoying major success marked by exhibitions in major British venues, nominations for the Turner Prize, inclusion in private collections (including the collection of Charles Saatchi) as well as commercial gallery representation (mostly by White Cube Gallery and Sadie Coles Gallery). Artists associated with yBa include, among others, Damien Hirst, Angus Fairhurst, Mat Collishaw, Tracey Emin, and Gillian Wearing.

²² Amelia Jones, "History Makers," *Frieze* 105 (March 2007), http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/history_makers/.

²³ At South London Gallery we were invited by then curator Donna Lynas, who runs Wysing Arts Centre (www.wysingartscentre.org) which presents music events, residencies, and festivals. Director Margot Heller, who directs South London Gallery, one of UK's leading public art galleries, was also instrumental in bringing *Her Noise* to fruition.

Across Disciplines

The territory we were covering, in terms of *what* music and *what* art we were concerned with, remained ambiguous and fluid, referred to only in passing through a mention of the cornerstones that defined the Her Noise sphere of interest: “what we envisaged was as indebted to Fluxus and performance art as it was to punk or No Wave.”²⁴

Even this attempt at mapping the outer edges of the Her Noise sphere of interest was not direct, but referential in its legacy claims, still not directly engaging with the contemporary art we wished to include. This fluidity, or ambiguity, is indicative of what I have already referred to as the “disciplinary slippage.” The question is whether this ambiguity of the curatorial voice was borne of a genuine desire to leave matters open-ended in an attempt to create the most “user friendly” and inclusive exhibition we could, or whether the “non-articulation” marked a strategic move aimed at infiltrating spaces that would otherwise never be *ours*. Were we too concerned about “coming clean” about our genuine desire to bring on board a fully fledged, unapologetic feminist (riot grrrl at that) exhibition for fear of it seeming too unfriendly a topic to cover in the context we were seeking?

It was important to us that this project should happen in what we considered to be the “mainstream space of art,” knowing that the space we were trying to claim for the project could not be claimed were we to be explicit in our association with feminism. The challenge was to create a project that dealt with questions of inclusion but that would not alienate the wider public. Our approach was not to talk about feminism, but to just *do* feminism.. More than ten years later, I find this approach to be deeply problematic, but it was symptomatic of the moment we were working in.

Useful Friction

Positioned at the intersection of a number of disciplines and communities within the publicly funded visual arts landscape of London (South London Gallery, Tate Modern, Goethe Institut), we actively promoted the project to visual arts audiences

²⁴ Džuverović and Neset, “Introduction,” 10.

through advertisements in art magazines including *Frieze*, *Artforum* and through an e-flux announcement, aiming to reach beyond the show's primary audiences. The most obvious, immediate communities of interest for Her Noise were the post-riot grrrl networks that spread internationally via Ladyfest, the Ladyfest network across the UK (we shot footage at Ladyfest London in 2002, and presented Her Noise "in progress" at Ladyfest Bristol in 2003), *The Wire* Magazine readership (*The Wire* was a media partner for Her Noise), and numerous local independent music and performance art communities. But we were not particularly focused on promoting the project to these audiences, knowing that they would come anyway. Once again, in the hope of casting a wider net, we attempted to go beyond our immediate circles by actively exposing the project to those for whom it would be new territory.

But what was the benefit of introducing grassroots musical communities into visual arts spaces? Which "official histories" did Her Noise seek to rethink—histories of music, visual arts, or performance? The very supposition that a "sea of amazing women making music"²⁵ would ever be recognized and embraced by "art history proper" is naïve, irrelevant, or a provocation. And it was indeed a provocation.

The ambition to insert punk rock and Riot Grrrl protagonists into visual arts spaces was a way of creating useful friction. For us, the "visual arts establishment" became synonymous with patriarchy, with the canon, a stubborn remainder of "high art" and class difference so prevalent in the UK and an embodiment of the dominant social order that was to be infiltrated and pierced. Her Noise was therefore never an attempt to rethink music history because it did not position itself within that community, but it was a deliberate infiltration which adopted methods and politics of its protagonists, not in the discourse, but in the tactics and in its infrastructure.

For example the work "Reverse Karaoke" by Kim Gordon and Jutta Koether, commissioned by Her Noise, functioned both as an installation and a democratizing platform, demystifying the entire process of music production. In the work, which consisted of a yurt painted by Gordon and Koether and that housed instruments set up for a band rehearsal and a simple recording system, audiences were able to play the instruments in the gallery to the pre-recorded voice of Kim Gordon. Once ready, the audience members cum musicians would alert the technician who would record their

²⁵ Džuverović and Neset, "Introduction," 9.

tune. The next step was to design a CD cover, leaving one copy as part of the installation and taking the other home. Over the years, “Reverse Karaoke” amassed over 1,500 recordings, now housed within the Her Noise archive at the LCC special collections and archives. “Reverse Karaoke” and Her Noise in its entirety stood as attempts to destabilize disciplinary and gender hierarchies by reinserting two “others” into the art history canon: the unpopular medium of sound and the previously marginalized female gender.

Perhaps the answer to the question “How is Her Noise a feminist project?” lies in its curatorial method, one that mimicks the strategies and forms of social organization present in music and sound communities, through the non-hierarchical, grassroots, empowering methodology in which agency is produced through collective action. In this sense, Her Noise was very much a Riot Grrrl project. It did not concern itself with theory nor with “proper ways of curating an exhibition” but was the curatorial equivalent of picking up a guitar without knowing how to play it and forming a band, distributing its own music, and in the process, forming a community.

Another aspect that must not be overlooked is that Her Noise also gave birth to Electra,²⁶ the arts organization founded in May 2003 as a vehicle to administer the fundraising and organizational aspects of Her Noise—in fact, Electra formed, and continues to form, the basis of communities that gathered around the project. A year later Electra became a regularly funded organization by Arts Council England and continues to function as an active feminist organization, based in London, producing and showcasing cross-disciplinary projects at the time of writing.

Behind The Scenes

Perhaps the most important longstanding achievements of Her Noise is the “behind the scenes” infrastructural work that reached far beyond what a regular exhibition would attempt to do through the difference of its curatorial methods. Perhaps, Hélène Cixous’s notion that “woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement”²⁷ undergirded the difference in Her Noise of the curatorial method, one based on collaborative, empowering, and inclusive practice

²⁶Additional information about Electra is available at <http://www.electra-productions.com>.

²⁷ Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” *The Routledge Language and Cultural Theory Reader*, ed. Lucy Burke, Tony Crowley, and Alan Girvin (London: Routledge, 2000), 161 .

which was not aimed at showcasing, but at building and supporting lasting communities. Perhaps the feminism of Her Noise inscribed the curatorial equivalent of *écriture féminine*, the act of inserting into the fabric of the highly commercialized artworld of London, a node, one based on the ethos and ways of working that emerged from the Riot Grrrl moment.